

MALISH

by Mike Resnick

His name was Malicious, and you can look it up in the American Racing Manual: from ages 2 to 4, he won 5 of his 46 starts, had seven different owners, and never changed hands for more than \$800.

His method of running was simple and to the point: he was usually last out of the gate, last on the backstretch, last around the far turn, and last at the finish wire.

He didn't have a nickname back then, either. Exterminator may

have been Old Bones, and Man o' War was Big Red, and of course Equipoise was the Chocolate Soldier, but Malicious was just plain Malicious.

Turns out he was pretty well-named, after all.

It was at Santa Anita in February of 1935 -- and this you can't look up in the Racing Manual, or the Daily Racing Form Chart Book, or any of the other usual sources, so you're just going to have to take my word for it -- and Malicious was being rubbed down by Chancey McGregor, who had once been a jockey until he got too heavy, and had latched on as a groom because he didn't know anything but the racetrack. Chancey had been trying to supplement his income by betting on the races, but he was no better at picking horses than at riding them -- he had a passion for claimers who were moving up in class, which any tout will tell you is a quick way to go broke -- and old Chancey, he was getting mighty desperate, and on this particular morning he stopped rubbing Malicious and put him in his stall, and then started trading low whispers with a gnarly little man who had just appeared in the shed row with no visitor's pass or anything, and after a couple of minutes they shook hands and the gnarly little man pricked Chancey's thumb with something sharp and then held it onto a piece of paper.

Well, Chancey started winning big that very afternoon, and the next day he hit a 200-to-1 shot, and the day after that he knocked down a \$768.40 daily double. And because he was a good-hearted man, he spread his money around, made a lot of girls

happy, at least temporarily, and even started bringing sugar cubes to the barn with him every morning. Old Malicious, he just loved those sugar cubes, and because he was just a horse, he decided that he loved Chancey McGregor too.

Then one hot July day that summer -- Malicious had now lost 14 in a row since he upset a cheap field back in October the previous year -- Chancey was rubbing him down at Hollywood Park, adjusting the bandages on his forelegs, and suddenly the gnarly little man appeared inside the stall.

"It's time," he whispered to Chancey.

Chancey dropped his sponge onto the straw that covered the floor of the stall, and just kind of backed away, his eyes so wide they looked like they were going to pop out of his head.

"But it's only July," he said in a real shakey voice.

"A deal's a deal," said the gnarly man.

"But I was supposed to have two years!" whimpered Chancey.

"You've been betting at five tracks with your bookie," said the gnarly man with a grin. "You've had two years worth of winning, and now I've come to claim what's mine."

Chancey backed away from the gnarly man, putting Malicious between them. The little man advanced toward him, and Malicious, who sensed that his source of sugar cubes was in trouble, lashed out with a forefoot and caught the gnarly little man right in the middle of the forehead. It was a blow that would have killed most normal men, but as you've probably guessed by now, this wasn't any

normal man in the stall with Malicious and Chancey, and he just sat down hard.

"You can't keep away from me forever, Chancey McGregor," he hissed, pointing a skinny finger at the groom. "I'll get you for this." He turned to Malicious. "I'll get you both for this, horse, and you can count on it!"

And with that, there was a puff of smoke, and suddenly the gnarly little man was gone.

Well, the gnarly little man, being who he was, didn't have to wait long to catch up with Chancey. He found him cavorting with fast gamblers and loose women two nights later, and off he took him, and that was the end of Chancey McGregor.

But Malicious was another story. Three times the gnarly little man tried to approach Malicious in his stall, and three times Malicious kicked him clear out into the aisle, and finally the gnarly little man decided to change his tactics, and what he did was to wait for Malicious on the far turn with a great big stick in his hand. Being who he was, he made sure that nobody in the grandstand or the clubhouse could see him, but it wouldn't have been a proper vengeance if Malicious couldn't see him, so he made a little adjustment, and just as Malicious hit the far turn, trailing by his usual 20 lengths, up popped the gnarly little man, swinging the paddle for all he was worth.

"I got you now, horse!" he screamed -- but Malicious took off like the devil was after him, which was exactly the case, and won the race by seven lengths.

As he was being led to the winner's circle, Malicious looked off to his left, and there was the gnarly little man, glaring at him.

"I'll be waiting for you next time, horse," he promised, and sure enough, he was.

And Malicious won that race by nine lengths.

And the gnarly little man kept waiting, and Malicious kept moving into high gear every time he hit the far turn, and before long the crowds fell in love with him, and Joe Hernandez, who called every race in California, became famous for crying "...and here comes Malish!"

Santa Anita started selling Malish t-shirts 30 years before t-shirts became popular, and Hollywood sold Malish coffee mugs, and every time old Malish won, he made the national news. At the end of his seventh year, he even led the Rose Bowl parade in Pasadena. (Don't take my word for it; there was a photo of it in Time.)

By the time he turned eight years old, Malish started slowing down, and the only thing that kept him safe was that the gnarly little man was slowing down too, and one day he came to Malish's stall, and this time he looked more tired than angry, and Malish just stared at him without kicking or biting.

"Horse," said the gnarly little man, "you got more gumption than most people I know, and I'm here to declare a truce. What do you say to that?"

Malish whinnied, and the gnarly little man tossed him a couple of sugar cubes, and that was the last Malish ever did see of him.

He lost his next eleven races, and then they retired him, and the California crowd fell in love with Seabiscuit, and that was that.

Except that here and there, now and then, you can still find a couple of railbirds from the old days who will tell you about old Malish, the horse who ran like Satan himself was chasing him down the homestretch.

That's the story. There really was a Malicious, and he used to take off on the far turn like nobody's business, and it's all pretty much the truth, except for the parts that aren't, and they're pretty minor parts at that.

Like I said, you can look it up.

-- The End --